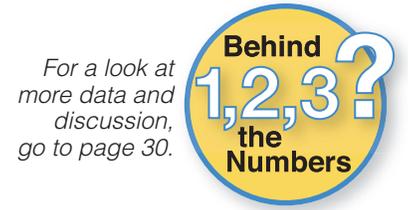


Behind the Numbers



Long-Term Consequences of Child Abuse

“Substantiated Child Abuse” is one of the indicators that the FCFC tracks under the Stable Families Outcome. While this indicator has fluctuated over the past two decades (see page 30), the historical trend for Montgomery County can be considered flat.

Over the years researchers have done a thorough job of documenting how early victimization is associated with negative outcomes in the areas of mental and physical health and with an increased likelihood that the individual will use poor parenting skills when he or she becomes a parent.¹ For example, women who were sexually abused as children have been shown to be more likely to have negative views of themselves as parents and to use physical violence when disciplining their children.²

Researchers have also been taking an overall look at the lives of adults who were victimized as children. A recently released study by David Zielinski is an example.³ Using data from an extensive national survey of adults between the ages of 18 and 54, he determined whether the respondents had ever been sexually abused, physically abused, and/or severely neglected as children. He also determined a number of characteristics about their current socioeconomic status, including whether they were unemployed, living below the poverty level, and eligible for Medicaid.

The results were dramatic. Adults who were victimized as children have an increased likelihood of being unemployed and/or in poverty and/or eligible for Medicaid. As Figure 1 illustrates, this propensity rises substantially for adults who suffered more than one type of maltreatment as a child.

With these results in mind, he considered some prior research identifying a low socioeconomic status with an increased risk for perpetrating child abuse and neglect. For example, one set of researchers,⁴ analyzing child abuse and economic data from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, determined that increases in the proportion of families with incomes below 75% of the poverty line⁵ are related to increases in many measures of maltreatment.

Reducing and eliminating child abuse are, of course, highly desired goals. Based on his analysis, Zielinski suggests that “the relationship between maltreatment and socioeconomic well-being ... may represent an important mechanism in the intergenerational cycle of violence” and calls for more research on these potential linkages.

Responding to Zielinski, a fellow researcher issues the same call and singles out the important role that resiliency can play in breaking this intergenerational cycle.⁶ It is important to note that the connection between being a child *victim* of abuse and an adult *perpetrator* of abuse is not automatic.

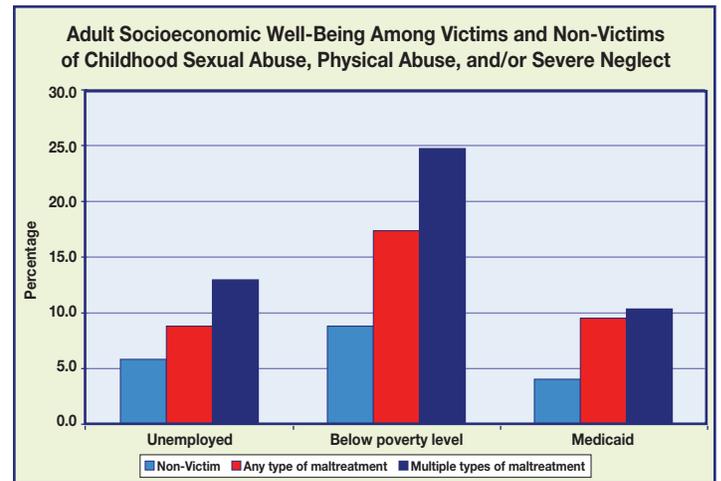


Figure 1. Each bar represents the percentage of victims or non-victims who are in the indicated socioeconomic condition. Because adult victims of childhood maltreatment are at increased risk for having a low socioeconomic status, there could be increased societal costs in addition to the personal toll that abuse takes on each victim. Examples of such costs include expenditures by the government for unemployment and public assistance benefits, and a loss of revenue from income taxes. Source: Zielinski, D.S. (2009).

¹ Some of this research is summarized in Zielinski, D.S. (2009). Child maltreatment and adult socioeconomic well-being. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 33(10), 666-678.

² Banyard, V. L. (1997). The impact of childhood sexual abuse and family functioning on four dimensions of women's later parenting. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 21(11), 1095-1107.

³ Zielinski, D.S., op. cit.

⁴ Paxson, C. and Waldfogel, J. (2002). Work, welfare, and child maltreatment. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 20(3), 435-474.

⁵ According to the 2000 Census, 70% of the people in poverty have incomes in this range; this represents 9% of the total population.

⁶ An “invited commentary” in the same issue of *Child Abuse & Neglect* as Zielinski's paper provides useful context and background on his report, and includes some thoughtful comments on the “cycle of violence.” Macmillan R. (2009). The life course consequences of abuse, neglect, and victimization: Challenges for theory, data collection, and methodology. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 33(10), 661-665.